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ABSTRACT

The first step in an effort to expand a writing laboratory program calls for the director and the current staff to investigate the areas in which expansion is desirable and can feasibly occur. This can be done by asking students to identify disciplines in which they would use additional tutorial help, or by addressing the faculty, especially those teaching freshman and sophomore level courses. Once a selected and limited number of expansion areas has been determined, the director can undertake the task of staffing. To provide tutors in a cost-effective manner, the first place a director should look is to the faculty itself. One possibility is to grant a faculty member a course reduction for a specified number of hours as a tutor. Student internships provide another cost-effective measure. Similar to any internship, the student would be granted academic credits for serving as a tutor in his or her major field. Another avenue for providing upper level students as tutors is to search for outside funding to pay outstanding seniors an hourly wage. Financial support can come from grants, fund-raising projects, or local businesses. Directors should keep in mind, however, that the moment a writing lab commits itself to expanded services, the director's responsibilities escalate. Consequently, the director's position must become a full-time position within the center. (HOD)

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From Writing Lab to Interdisciplinary
Academic Support Center: Cost-Effective Guidelines

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From Writing Lab to Interdisciplinary
Academic Support Center: Cost-Effective Guidelines

In recent years, two self-evident truths abound on our campuses: 1) there is a definite need for writing labs to expand and offer additional tutorial services; 2) this need often falls victim to an ongoing academic budget crunch. As colleges and universities search out areas for cut-backs, it's imperative that Writing Lab Directors produce cost-effective means to expand their lab's services, rather than accept cutbacks in funding. At Penn State-Behrend we've enjoyed a healthy rapport with and support from our administrators who've encouraged us to forge ahead with plans to expand our Center. This rapport, in part, results from our efforts to provide means of expansion that are "cost effective," i.e. inexpensive yet productive steps resulting in additional staffing and services. This paper will delineate means through which Centers can expand services without requiring heavy injections of capital.

The first step in an expansion program necessitates that the Director and the current staff investigate the areas in which expansion is desirable and can feasibly occur. There are some immediate cautions within this phase. Don't try to jump too far too quickly. A writing lab which announces tutorial expansions into every discipline across the college's curriculum is likely to lose credibility during that crucial evaluation period when a scrutinizing eye is determining the effectiveness of the tutorial services offered. Labs considering expansion should formu-

late and conduct a type of Needs Assessment. Basically this procedure attempts to identify areas for which tutorial service is in greatest demand. Such a Needs Assessment can be conducted from two approaches. Students using the Center are surveyed, asking them to identify disciplines in which they would utilize additional tutorial help. It's also possible to announce such a survey and allow students to drop into the Lab to fill out a request questionnaire. The other avenue is to address faculty, especially those faculty teaching freshmen and sophomore courses. Questions should be designed to delineate the actual tutorial service required. For example, the professor who has 140 students in his beginning psychology section can help to distinguish whether his students need aid in study skills, writing competence on essay exams--areas already served by writing labs--or whether his students need tutorial help in grasping the tenets of basic psychology. If the latter is the case, the Director can begin to establish a priority list of disciplines which might be added to the Center.

At Penn State-Behrend, we have moved our Center from writing and study skills, into the areas of math/calculus, chemistry, and computer science, after determining the need through the above process. We have requests for additional expansion, but we are proceeding carefully for several central reasons which this paper will continue to address: 1) we are attempting to expand into these disciplines without requesting additional capital for support; 2) we are determining the most cost-effective means of providing tutors for the expansion; and 3) quite frankly,

as in most universities, there is only so much space available in which to expand without appearing to imitate the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Once a selected and limited number of expansion areas is determined and with additional considerations for space and time, the Director undertakes the task of staffing the new discipline.

To provide tutors in a cost-effective manner, the first place a Director should look is to the faculty itself. If the Director demonstrates that a significant number of students is requesting tutorial aid, say, from three different sections of computer science, then he can approach and ask the faculty member to come on staff at the Center, perhaps for a certain number of hours during one day of the week. There are basically two appeals to enlist the aid of the faculty. The professor can be asked to donate his time. Before immediately balking at such a suggestion, consider first that the faculty member might actually want to meet with students having difficulties. Secondly, consider that all faculty normally undergo a yearly review process. Donation of one's time to a tutorial center may be credited to the professor during his yearly evaluation in the categories of service to the university or scholarly activity. Moreover, this time in the Center is more than just an extension of the professor's office hours since he is likely to encounter students from sections other than his own, including students interested and involved but not currently enrolled in his discipline.

Yet another possibility, which we have used at Penn State-Behrend, is to grant a faculty member a course reduction for a

specified number of hours as tutor. In institutions where this procedure is applicable, the professor, the Director of the Center, and the appropriate Dean arrange a contractual agreement scheduling the faculty member as tutor in lieu of one or more courses. The arrangement is subject to renewal or revision on a semester or yearly basis.

There are the obvious advantages, as Writing Centers expand, to staffing the Center with representative faculty from the new disciplines offered, but there are likewise cautions. The Director must carefully approach faculty. He needs and expects to staff the Center with those faculty who have demonstrated a rapport and willingness to work with students who are not always the best in their studies. Faculty who conceivably see service to the Tutorial Center as only a means of reducing their teaching load must be encouraged to understand the expectations of their work and commitment to the Center.

These two means of acquiring faculty in an expanded Center can be argued as cost-effective: the first as completely voluntary; the second as in-kind service. As college administrators begin to grant more faculty reduced teaching assignments for involvement in research projects or in faculty governance, time must also be appropriated to the Tutorial Center which has demonstrated its value to students. With careful scheduling and utilization, even space limitations are manageable as the Center expands. The room that functions as a computer science center on Thursday afternoons may easily become the Psychology center on Friday mornings. Don't forget that Saturdays and even Sundays

are days when the Center can be open, with proper planning. Dormitory residents have been known to do some semblance of academic work on weekends, and certainly, our libraries, science labs, and computer rooms are busy on these days.

Before moving on to a discussion of student tutors in expanded centers, there is an additional consideration in providing cost-effective faculty-staff tutoring: additional training for the staff of the Center. This idea is especially feasible in currently popular disciplines. A writing tutor--staff or faculty member--may begin to study basic computer programming or English as a second language for his own benefit and development. That particular tutor can be asked to bring his additional expertise to the Center for the E.S.L. or computer student. Ultimately the tutor, the Center, the students will all benefit from the possibility of this individual interdisciplinary approach.

One of the most exciting ideas being investigated at Penn State-Behrend is Student Internships in our Center. Director Michael Tkach is currently developing a program to establish credit internships for outstanding senior majors. Similar to any internship, the student will be granted academic credits, from one to three, for serving as a tutor in his major field within the Center. The number of hours per week depends upon the number of credits chosen. Director Tkach will supervise and train the student for his role within the Center; the student will have a faculty mentor in his major to whom he reports and for whom he will write a paper discussing his experience and function as a tutor at the conclusion of his internship. Again, there is

an obvious cost-effectiveness to such a program. Internships must be co-ordinated and established with the In-Charge faculty in the particular major and must normally be approved by a program committee within the university. Among students, there is a great deal of enthusiasm for this type of credit internship, especially for those majors planning on graduate study. Such a program is also a means of expanding the Center's hours into the weekends and evenings, again making the greatest use of space and time limitations. In addition, excellent students in their junior and even sophomore years are enthusiastically donating their time for basic tutoring in their majors. These undergraduates see voluntary work as a practical contribution to their education, a worthwhile extracurricular activity, and a preparation for the credit internship in their senior years. As interest grows for this type of program, though, a caution is advisable. The Director must remember not to over-expand, over-extend the functions of the Center. The results of the Needs Assessment should have focused a limited number of areas for expansion, and immediate concentration should remain within this focus. The Director's time commitment, itself, is an important consideration as he assumes the responsibility not only for the co-ordination and operation of an expanded Center, but also for the training of tutors.

Another avenue for providing upper level students as tutors is to search for outside funding to pay outstanding seniors an hourly wage. Herein the Director assumes another responsibility as he becomes a researcher and a proposal/grant writer. The

proper investigations may turn up surprising possibilities. For example, the Veteran's Administration has paid hourly wages to a veteran-tutor working with veterans. Additionally, many universities receive outside funding coming into a Basic Skills Budget or an Educational Opportunities Program Budget. These monies can oftentimes be allocated to the hourly wages of tutors in the Center, if particular criteria are fulfilled.

Also, during the time of expansion, there are at least two additional means of providing minimal financial support for the Center. Neither of these requires the Director to approach an Administrator with hand outstretched. Every college has student organizations, including honor societies, fraternities, sororities, which are eager to undertake a campaign for the support of a university activity. The Tutorial Center should become the focal point of an on-going fund-raising project. Now the Director assumes the role of Center Advocate and Public Relations contact with the group in question. He can advise the group of the Center's need for funds to support the expansion or ask the group to undertake a fund-raiser to provide needed supplies, anything from textbooks to Apple computers. As the Center expands into a discipline, chemistry for example, and utilizes the chemistry faculty member along with the chemistry major, the Director may involve a campus organization, the Chemistry Club, in the Center, requesting the Club to provide the necessary basic chemistry texts or simply to conduct a campaign culminating in a gift or donation for the Center's use.

If, by this time, the Director has any hours left in his

day, with the approval of the Administration he may consider going outside the immediate university for financial support. In his presentation to the Writing Centers Association Fourth Annual Conference, Professor Thomas Nash reported the successful efforts of Tom Waldrep at the University of South Carolina whose center opened its doors to business writing problems within the community, and thereafter received financial support from local business.¹ Wherever appropriate, the Center Director may provide similar service without specific charge but with the acceptance of donations. At Penn State-Behrend, our lab has assisted alumni with job applications, resumés, and other diverse written projects. When the alumnus responds to the annual fund drive for the whole university, we think it's appropriate to remind him of our service and to ask him to designate some part of his gift for the support of the Center.

These methods of eliciting support for the Tutorial Center are not meant to, nor will they, produce thousands of dollars or even hundreds of dollars in a given year's time. They do, however, remind students, outsiders, and alumni of the Center's needs, and they demonstrate to the Administration that the Director is involved in the financial support of the Center.

A word must be offered about the Center's Director at this point. The moment that a Writing Lab commits to expanded services, the Director's responsibilities escalate. He is now

¹Thomas Nash, "The Writing Center: Life at the Frontier," PROCEEDINGS Writing Centers Association Fourth Annual Conference, Ohio Dominican College, May 1, 1982, pg. 110.

concerned with the integration of additional disciplines, staff training in areas outside his own discipline, additional programs both within and without the university, and he will eventually if not immediately become involved with the budgetary affairs of the Center. For these reasons, when there is a commitment to expansion, the Director's position must become a full time position WITHIN the Center. In many of our institutions, the Writing Lab Co-ordinator is also a half-time English faculty member. While it might be an ideal to keep the Director in the classroom, the practical and time-consuming tasks involved in expanding a Center will certainly argue against the somewhat popular "half-time here, half-time there" practice. Each Director must establish this position if the expansion is to be meaningful and productive.

In conclusion, the suggestions discussed within this paper for the careful and cost-effective expansion of Writing Labs into Academic Support Centers will hopefully generate additional ideas and methods appropriate to individual schools. With the success of Writing Labs and with the frequently encountered requests of "can't you provide a tutor for. . .", it is certainly difficult to overlook the need for growth. The careful and cost-effective expansion of the Writing Lab under the leadership of a concerned Director will benefit the education of our students and will contribute to their retention. Ultimately, the expanded Center will enhance the overall quality of education in our universities.